

September 2004

## Reference Reviews: A Publisher's Critique

Sylvia K. Miller

*Taylor & Francis Books, Inc.*, [Sylvia.Miller@taylorandfrancis.com](mailto:Sylvia.Miller@taylorandfrancis.com)

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Sylvia K. (2004) "Reference Reviews: A Publisher's Critique," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 16: Iss. 4, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4388>

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# Reference Reviews: A Publisher's Critique

by **Sylvia K. Miller** (Publishing Director, Routledge Reference, an Imprint Taylor & Francis Books, Inc., 270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016; Phone: 212-216-7852) <Sylvia.Miller@taylorandfrancis.com>

In reference publishing, we need reviews both for simple and obvious reasons and for more complex, not-so-obvious reasons. The simple, obvious need is to sell our books and stay in business. In particular, we need reviews in the publications that librarians read: *Library Journal*, *Choice*, and *Booklist*, *Against the Grain*, and other key periodicals. We are aware of librarians' increasing reliance upon these publications to help them make the difficult choices of how to spend their limited budget dollars.

In the past couple of years, more and more customers have been waiting to read reviews before ordering a reference book, even one from a reputable publisher whose scholarly quality they trust. Consequently, it has become more important than ever not only to receive a good review but also to have that good news appear as early as possible. Libraries striving to maintain top-notch collections, as well as publishers, benefit from early reviews, and we are grateful to those library magazines that accept page proofs for review pre-publication.

What is perhaps a less obvious—but vital—benefit of reviews, is that a thoughtfully penned critique can offer publishers an array of valuable lessons and help us to improve the quality of our books. We look to reviews to reaffirm that the investment we are making is worthwhile and potentially profitable, not just in general but in specific ways. I can probably speak for every reference editor, publisher, and marketer when I say that we went into this business because we love big, beautiful, scholarly books that students, scholars, and researchers rely upon for many years to provide information and enlightenment. We like striving to turn the chaos of facts and knowledge into order, structure, and balance; we like to work with scholars to define a field and present it to an audience wider than that field. It is wonderful to have customers who appreciate high quality and therefore make scholarly reference publishing a sustainable and profitable business. However, as patrons' habits change and needs in libraries change, so the definition of what constitutes quality undergoes continual revision, often in subtle but nevertheless significant ways.

Transcending the competitiveness natural to any businessperson, my reaction to reviews has become, perhaps surprisingly, disinterested in whether the subject of the review is my book or another publisher's book. If reviewers are knowledgeable, careful, and fair, that is good for the business of reference publishing at large, because it will encourage us to continue to strive for high quality in the product that we produce. On the other hand, if reviewers do not notice or appreciate aspects of our books that we thought essential to high quality, I worry that quality of that type

may deteriorate in the reference-publishing business, as a matter of economics, because every quality feature costs the publisher money.

Over twenty years of reading reviews of library reference books, I have become appreciative of well-done reviews, because I like the lessons that they are teaching, and critical of those that are less well done, because I fear the cumulative effect of such reviews on the business of reference publishing. Following are the six most important things that I like and don't like to see in reviews, with some thoughts about the messages that certain types of statements or omissions send, whether intended or not.

## 1. I like to see comparisons with previously published works.

Because reference works often stay on library shelves for a long time, reference editors who are conducting competition research for a new-book proposal often must consider works that are up to twenty years old. In a review, a comparison with a previously published work tells us whether or not we made a good decision competing directly against an already-existing reference work, and if we're the publisher of the already-existing work, it's good to have it appreciated, especially if it's still in print. It also tells us how long reference works are currently considered useful.

I wonder sometimes, if a previously published work on the same topic is not mentioned, whether the reviewer did not research other works or whether he or she has assumed that an older work is no longer a viable resource. Fairly recently, several excellent reviews of an encyclopedia appeared that did not mention a multi-volume set on the same topic that was published in the late 1980s and won the **Dartmouth Medal**. Such omissions can ultimately send the message that only the most recent works are useful, which might lead some libraries to discard classic resources. They can also increase the pressure on reference publishers to publish more and more new product to sustain sales, thereby creating a glut in a shrinking print market, which hurts all reference publishers, not just the one that published the eight-volume set so many years ago. Preferably, a review can point out ways in which a new volume and a classic older set are complementary, or make it clear if an earlier work is completely supplanted by a new one.

## 2. I don't like to see a preface repeated verbatim without analysis.

If the publisher's words are repeated without attribution or comment, clearly the reviewer has not done his or her homework. I like to see the reviewer comment on the publisher's words; sometimes we learn a lesson about who will

use our book versus who we had hoped would use it, for example.

I first noticed this phenomenon several years ago when researching competition in an area that I hoped would be a viable topic for a new reference work. A review of a previously published work stated that the index listed people, cities, countries, companies, and organizations. Looking at the work at the New York Public Library, I saw the same descriptive sentence in the preface while recognizing that the index itself was, in simpler terms, a proper-name index. There are many kinds of indexes for many purposes, and one could argue that a proper-name index was appropriate to the work; however, if the reviewer had an opinion on the relative value in this work of a proper-name index versus an analytical index, he or she did not share it. The publisher was surely encouraged to continue to provide proper-name indexes, which are comparatively easy and inexpensive to produce, and I wondered, albeit briefly, whether it was still worthwhile from a business perspective to invest in costly analytical indexes. Finally, this review taught me the importance of a good selling preface, surely not the lesson the reviewer intended to teach!

Even though the publisher's words can be useful in describing the work—how many articles it contains, or how many different countries the contributors represent, for example—in general, reviews that parrot publishers' words are not likely to lead to improved quality of the product over time, or to greater honesty in prefaces and marketing copy.

## 3. I like to have an excellent index appreciated.

It is important that reviewers continue to demonstrate intense interest in indexes. Sometimes I wish that I could have a follow-up conversation with a reviewer about the legitimate and necessary choices that are often made in indexing, but in general, reviewers' specific praise and criticism affirms that our investment in thorough, analytical indexes is worthwhile.

Two examples on the extremes of the critical spectrum will illustrate my point. In one sad case, I did not see a sample of the index or the finished index until the book was ready to go to the printer. The index alarmed me; it was short and lightweight, more of an outline of the book than a real index. To keep production on schedule, I hired a different indexer to improve the index as best she could over a weekend. It appeared that I had made a good business decision until the reviews appeared. Reviewers criticized the index severely, a highly unusual event for **Routledge**. I was stung. The reviews not only taught me that it is impossible to "fix" a bad index in two days, but they also reminded me that a solid index is good business as well as good pedagogy.

A happier story is one about an index that cost a hefty price. The indexer was especially

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well suited to index this innovative multi-volume work, and her deep understanding of its scope and purpose led her to open many alternate windows into the content that the entry list and the cross-references could not provide. She worked late into the night for weeks to meet our deadline; the index was so long that even when we typeset it in three columns in very small type it still occupied 120 book pages. The *Booklist* reviewer wrote, "The index is thoroughly excellent." I still glow with pride at that high praise, and with pleasure at the recognition that the accomplishment was understood and appreciated, and the investment justified.

### 4. *I don't like to see page count ignored in comments about price-per-volume.*

Comments about price are one way that we continue to learn about the customer's perception of value. Reference publishers know that our books are considered expensive, and we understand that the decision to purchase is often difficult. Unfortunately, however, the perceived fair price for one reference volume does not seem to change with the size of the volume. For example, recently I read a review complaining that \$195 was an "exorbitant price" for a 900-page reference book. If the publisher had split the volume in two, without adding a word of content, and charged \$250 for the two-volume set, the reviewer probably would have thought the price was fair. I would ask reviewers to keep in mind that there is a significant difference between 900 and 600 pages: 300 more pages means more words to commission and contributors to pay; more deadlines to track and reminders to send out; more manuscript to pay scholars to review; more manuscripts to revise and finalize; more copyediting, typesetting, proofreading, indexing to supervise; more paper to purchase.

Profit margins in reference publishing are not high, at least insofar as I am aware of them across the industry. If a volume is only a volume, no matter what its size, publishers will keep prices lower by creating shorter volumes, perhaps not the result that reviewers intend. It might be helpful to develop a general awareness among reviewers and publishers of price-per-page instead.

### 5. *I like it when a reviewer notes that articles are signed and looks at the qualifications of the contributors who signed them.*

An encyclopedia that assembles the work of numerous professors is a feat of organization and labor as well as scholarship, and it is important for reviewers to let the publisher know that the investment of time and money is needed and appreciated. At **Routledge**, most of the reference works that we create contain hundreds or thousands of articles written by scholars and experts because we believe that such works have the best chance of containing thorough, authoritative material in every entry. It is especially helpful when a reviewer of a scholarly encyclopedia notes that each article was written by a qualified expert in the topic and recognizes that a peer-review process has taken place for each

article. If, in addition, through the work of in-house editors and scholarly advisors, the work presents a topic or field of study in a way that is coherent, balanced, perhaps even pathbreaking, it is terrific to have that achievement recognized.

I know that for librarians, whose primary goal is service to their patrons, quality and usefulness are inextricably intertwined. If what we have accomplished was unnecessary, and another type of reference would have served as well or better, we need to be aware of that. In general, though, with a free-for-all of unsubstantiated information influencing students hourly on the Internet, one might argue that now more than ever it is important for publishers and librarians to continue to work together to define authority and provide quality resources.

### 6. *If the book is appropriate for high schools as well as for academic and public libraries, I like to see the review say so.*

"Highly recommended for academic and large public libraries" is a typical conclusion of a review of a **Routledge** reference work, and it is certainly one of which we are proud. It is appropriate for many of our high-level works that have a theoretical or professional bent. However, many of our works on historical, cultural, and literary topics are appropriate for a wider audience.

Although we rarely creates reference works specifically intended for schools alone, many wonderful U.S. high schools continue to invest in scholarly reference books and multi-volume sets for use by motivated, college-bound students for term papers and school projects. Many different kinds and sizes of public libraries do the same, to support local high school students as well as adult researchers. Because the word "high school" or the general phrase "all libraries" is so often omitted from that all-important "Recommended" line, the librarians who have developed and who continue to maintain these impressive curriculum-oriented collections are missing some useful resources, while publishers are missing sales.

Perhaps some reviewers do not find our books useful for schools and most public libraries. In any case, we continue to learn from reviews about the market potential for our books and about who our audience is. For example, once we sent a single-volume encyclopedia to a publication that reviews young-adult resources, and the reviewer, while respecting the quality of the work, criticized it for containing terminology unfamiliar to young adults. The review reminded us that at the school level, our books are most useful to the top tier of students in the eleventh and twelfth grades. An additional, perhaps unintended result of the review was to cause us to be very careful when sending review copies to that particular journal!

On the other hand, recently the **Pennsylvania School Librarians Association** picked six of our reference works to honor in their "YA Top Forty Reference 2003 Titles." At least three of the six had not previously been recommended as resources for high schools in the library review media. We are grateful to the Pennsylvania librarians for their work to create this list and for their enthusiasm, which we hope will rub off on library reviewers everywhere.

The foregoing points might sound minor and picky, but it bears repeating that creating each reference work requires a sizeable investment in money and time. It takes a team of scholars and in-house staff several years to create an encyclopedia, and the cost is significant—sometimes hundreds of thousands of dollars. Yet the review that can make or break a reference work is typically only a few column inches long. Interestingly, reviews of online resources tend to be longer; we look forward to receiving more of those reviews as we extend our online publishing program.

Because every review teaches publishers a lesson, whether intended or not, reviewers have a tremendous responsibility. I do hope that does not discourage librarians from taking on review assignments. To conclude, I would like to offer a few words to reviewers and review journals: We have great respect for what you do. Even though **Routledge** fortunately receives many excellent reviews, we never become jaded or blasé about them; when we receive a Best Reference rating or a starred review, there is dancing in the halls! We know that keeping up with the flood of new publications is an enormous challenge for the review journals, and yet we recognize that the quality of reviewing continues to improve over time; please keep up the good work. In an era in which there is a great deal of worthy competition and library budgets are tight, your dispassionate view is crucial, helping our customers and us make the best choices to serve library patrons and communities. 🍌

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*Thank you to **Barbara Bibel of Oakland Public Library**, who invited me to give the panel presentation at **ALA** on which this article is based, and to the colleagues both in and outside of **Routledge** who offered valuable comments. — SM*

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price. Students said they would purchase a textbook if it was made an integral part of the course by the instructor. And 90% of the faculty surveyed by the **Follett Higher Education Group**, said that "students absolutely need a textbook for this course." But when asked why students did not buy the textbook 29% of the time, faculty said that "the text was not perceived as valuable." Hmmm ... No wonder libraries are sometimes asked by students to purchase textbooks and place them on reserve.

The awesome **Mark Walter** (Consultant to Content Technology Strategies) is pursuing editorial and consulting opportunities. He is also working with **Frank Gilbane's Bluebill Advisors** <http://www.bluebilladvisors.com>. Mark can be reached at (215) 643-1878 (home office) or <mark\_walter@verizon.net>.

And, last but definitely not least, just received the new **Special issue** to v.41 of *Choice, Current Reviews for Academic Libraries, Web VIII*. Can you believe that *Choice* first published their Web

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